Notes on the Early History of the Dent du Requin.

By J. P. FARRAR.[1]

THE most fantastic feature on the Requin is the great Cheminée Fontaine.[2] This was first used, but as a *means of descent*, by M. Emile Fontaine with the guides Joseph and Alphonse Simond on July 25, 1898.

In note 3, 'A.J.' **38,** 269, the words 'the chimney is *said* to have been ascended' brought a letter from Baron van Heemstra, late Hon. Sec. of the Netherlands A.V., pointing out that the *second ascent* of the great chimney was made on August 3, 1913, in 3 hours, by Mr. P. Kemper, a member of that Club, led by the Chamonix guide Jacques Tissay, with his younger brother Léonard as porter. The report is to be found in the *Journal* of that Club for 1913, pp. 80–81, and my thanks are due to Baron van Heemstra for translating the essential bits, which read:

'Looking aloft I wonder how we shall descend through the chimney, when Tissay, my tried guide, proposes to use it for the *ascent*. The first efforts to ascend the chimney, directly, fail. I climb after him, support him with shoulders, head and arms, but he caught no hold on the smooth granite walls. To the chimney's left is a narrow crack that pierces deeply in the rock. When it is possible to arrive at the highest and deepest part of this crack, you might, hanging on your hands, make a traverse to the left (*sic*), till you are again in the outer wall (Aussenwand). Following, very exposed, this wall in the same manner—now to the right—you can get again into the chimney and after that attain, half way, a jammed block. It lasts rather long before Tissay has conquered these difficulties, especially as the walls of the chimney are covered with ice which must be cleared off.

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[1] The history and topography of this mountain are treated in great detail in the admirable monographic Vallot guide, *Les Aiguilles de Chamonix*, by Jacques de Lépiney, E. de Gigord and Dr. A. Migot.

[2] I know only one chimney equally fantastic, less difficult, but three times as high, viz., the great chimney on the E. face of the Rosengarten, first ascended by Raynor and Phillimore with Antonio Dimai and L. Rizzi in 1896.

'Before we can follow our leader, he has also to clear the second part of the chimney of the ice. We squat down behind the rock where a projecting part of the wall offers protection against the falling ice. At last the end of the second rope, tied by Tissay to the iron piton above the block, dangles down. We must climb now the chimney direct assisted by the rope. To give more rope to the guide I unrope myself, and it is first the porter's turn. Alone and forsaken I stay behind, hearing nothing of my invisible partners save the scratch of the boots and the laboured breath of Tissay, Jr.

'. . . Very happy I am when I see the rope's end and, supported by it, I begin to climb, but notwithstanding I need much time and enormous exertion to join the guide and porter. The jammed block has hardly room for two people ; as soon as I arrive Tissay attacks the second part of the chimney. The sides are so close to each other that it is impossible to bring the knees to the height of the lowest part of the back and it is very difficult to cling to the rock. Yet Tissay succeeds in raising himself higher, inch by inch, between those perpendicular, smooth granite walls and so attains the top of the chimney.

'Young Tissay and then I follow. Half-way I find two small projecting humps, which give some support and a chance to blow a bit. From the foot of the chimney we took 3 hours to conquer a difference of 50 metres. We succeeded by Tissay's extraordinary ability and pertinacity.'

Strange to say, no details of the *first ascent* of this chimney have been recorded, and I made it my business to investigate it. The President and Mr. Sydney Spencer suggested my making enquiries of Hans Almer, who had accompanied each of them for several campaigns. My application to my friend Henry de Ségogne resulted in the rumour that the leader had been 'le petit Pollinger.' On writing to Josef I found that he knew all about the matter—what does he not know ?—and that Hans Almer had told him all about his ascent. Hans is known to many of us as one of the most determined and skilled climbers of his day and as a sound and careful mountaineer. He was probably the strongest of all the five Almer brothers, if indeed any distinction can be made in such a redoubtable family. He led the first ascent of the Grépon by the now properly named 'Plaques Morse' with the President and Ulrich, Hans's elder brother, who, that day, was hampered by a damaged hand.

I wrote to young Peter Almer, to see his uncle Hans, likewise an old friend of mine. This is what young Peter writes :

'Hans says he did make the first ascent of the Requin by the chimney. He says he cannot recognize on the photograph [3] where he went. He followed the regular route as far as the point where one turns to the right and descends a bit [this is the foot of the chimney]. From this point, he states, a little chimney leads up slightly to the left. This he climbed and did not find it easy. Then follows a little gully [? ledge—G. H. M.] (Rinne) to the right towards the great chimney. In this gully there is handhold and one must climb across like a cat on a wall. The first bit in the great chimney is, he states, not the most difficult, but higher up it is very steep and difficult. The bit from the top of the chimney to the summit is not difficult. The Herr was Mr. Joseph Gibson and the date July 1899. The second guide was Christian Bohren, likewise of Grindelwald.'

Mr. Gibson is good enough to supply further information which I print in full:

'I remember going up the Requin perfectly and our surprise when we found out that we had gone up the way that hitherto had only been descended. It had not been much climbed up to then and there was some difficulty in getting directions of the usual route, but Hans Almer came across someone who told him the way—at any rate so he told me—and so we set off. The finding of a practicable route over the lower part of the chimney was rather lengthy as there was nothing very satisfactory in the way of handholds and the distance between them was large. The chimney, in the route we took over the lower part, offered no opportunities of jamming. The upper part offered no difficulties.

'Hans Almer had never been up before nor had, of course, the other guide. In fact, I think it was Hans Almer's second visit to Chamonix, so nearly everything we did was new to him.'

It is a great satisfaction to put on record an account of a climb that reflects distinction on the whole party.

While engaged in these investigations I applied very naturally to that inexhaustible source of information, my very good friend Claude Wilson. I am fortunate enough to assure the permanent record of these early experiences on the Requin. He writes (collated extracts from several letters):

'You tell me you are interested to hear what I know about the early attempts on the Requin.

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[3] Plate 3, *A.J.* **38,** opp. 268.

'I believe I was the first to spot it as an unclimbed peak, and worth climbing. Before that it was merely the end of the Plan ridge. This was about 1889, and in that year and the next it was a bit of a secret and Wicks and Morse used to call it "Pic Wilson" and it was regarded as my preserve.

'Then I—not caring to use the name—called it "The peak round the corner"—which took on among the initiated gang—partly because it helped to keep secret the whereabouts of those mysterious expeditions. This name or appellation probably held the field till 1893 [4]—when "Dent du Requin" was suggested, I think by Conway, and at once universally adopted. The name could not be bettered, as from near the present hut it much resembles the outline of a shark's tooth.

'On July 31, 1890, I started with C. H. Pasteur and Auguste Cupelin, a splendid rock climber, but an indifferent guide on snow. Had he rounded the base of the Requin, as I wished, and as everybody does, we *might* have got up, for the weather was fine, and starting at 2.15 A.M. from Montenvers we could have reached the position of the present hut about 5. Cupelin refused this way, and said the right way up the Plan was up the ice-fall between the Requin and the Rognon. We floundered about those crevasses and séracs for 3 or 4 hours, but could find no way up, and turned back, having never set foot on the Requin.

'I had to go home then, and "presented" the peak to Wicks and Morse, who (a few days later I think) made the first attempt. They tried the buttress on the left side (ascending) of the Fontaine chimney, climbing by a crack to some height, but did not succeed in traversing thence into the angle of the chimney, though they got part way towards it.

'To continue my narrative: Wicks and Morse made several further attempts—(seven I think in all) and I was with them on two or three. The weather was often so bad that nothing was attempted on the top rocks; and on no occasion was the Fontaine chimney found free from ice. The last time that we tried the Fontaine chimney was on July 26, 1893, when we started from the Col du Géant, and rounded above the Rognon. Morse got up a crack on its left, and I followed with much pulling. From the little platform reached, we each had a try to get into the bed of the chimney, but no progress was made in gaining height. There was a lot of ice in the angle of the

[4] See *A.J.* **17**, 9.

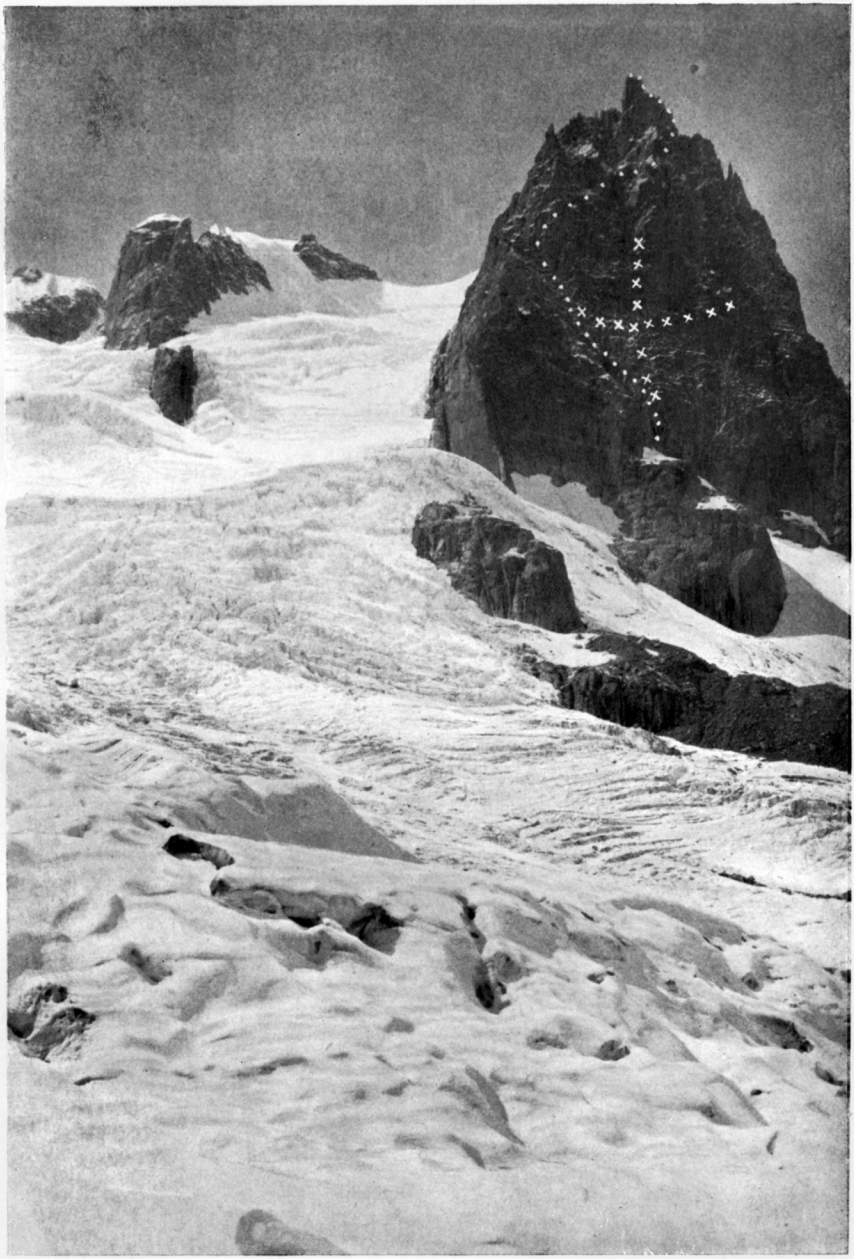
chimney and on the traverse and crack leading to it. Finely balanced and awkwardly placed, one could not chip the ice away with a piolet. We always felt that the route was probably possible, if we could get it free from ice, which accounts for our hammering away at this route instead of trying to round the top, which seemed also an equally difficult proposition. I meant, if I went again, to take a sharp-pointed hammer which could be used one-handed to chip away the ice. If we could reach the bed of the chimney we thought we could probably get up.[5]

'We had found traces of another party on our way up the lower rocks and on the shoulder, and there was apparently a cairn on the top. Obviously if this was really so, the ascent had not been made by the chimney, where there were no traces. Of course we all know now that it had been climbed on the preceding day (July 25) by Mummery, Slingsby, Hastings and Collie, and we all know the circuitous route they took.

'On August 6 (1893) we (the same party) starting from Montenvers, tried to reach the final part of the Mummery-Collie route from the foot of the S.E. face. We spent a long day on the rocks trying first up the middle, then right, and eventually left, where we thought we had found a possible line of ascent, from the foot of the S.E. face keeping well to the left, till nearly level with the place where they crossed below the summit, and then traversing to the right to join their route. We started from Montenvers 2.30 A.M. and got back at 7.45 P.M.'

'In 1896 (July 9) Wicks and I, with Alfred Simond, made the ascent by the route just alluded to. We were always coaching Simond (who led), and making him go further to the left in the earlier part of the climb. (This seems to have been the second ascent of the Requin.) On the top I tried to get down by the Fontaine Chimney. My note runs: "Had not enough spare rope—would probably require 150 ft. extra rope to leave behind, or 300 ft. to double." Our 100 ft. thin spare was not nearly long enough, and I was not sure of finding a landing place half-way down. Consequently (Alfred Simond above) I tried down the S. face of the great rock which forms the (true) right wall of the

[5] This route was doubtless followed by Hans Almer in his first ascent of the Fontaine Chimney, and by Tissay on the second. It is understood that both M. Jacques de Lépiney and Mr. Bower—independently, and neither knowing anything of these attempts and ascents—have indicated this line of ascent as offering the best chance.



DENT DU REQUIN.

chimney,[6] hoping to reach the place where I had been before with Morse (ascending). Half-way down I found *climbing* impossible; and, though I could have been lowered, it was questionable if the last man could get down with the rope at our disposal. Consequently we descended by the way we had gone up. We spent 1½ hrs. trying this route and in the top of the chimney, and lost another hour lower down by taking the rocks too far E. (Simond's constant temptation both up and down). We left Montenvers 12.5 A.M. and got back 11 P.M.—were on the rocks from 5 A.M. till 7.40 P.M.—and on the top (including time spent trying to get down chimney) 11.55 A.M. to 2 P.M.

'I don't think there is a decent picture of the Requin in the "A.J." The best I know is that in Mummery's book, but that now given (source unknown) is better. The dotted route is our route up and down, and this route crosses our exploration route (August 6, 1893). We went up the central chimney till we got stuck; then came down and tried to the right, and eventually to the left, going far enough to feel sure we had struck oil.

'The summit of the Requin consists of "three enormous sabs planted endways" (Wicks, "A.J." **17,** 87). Three giant blocks or towers or monoliths others might call them.

A. North—highest—top of Requin.
B. South—perhaps 30 feet lower.
C. East of B. and about half its height.

The Fontaine chimney lies between A and B and faces S.E. All of these are readily identified on the photo "A.J." **38,** 268. In this photo, block C looks as if it might be part and parcel of B. In reality it stands well in front, and is separated from B by a well-marked crack or "fissure" (Morse) and a small "col," where there is an ample platform for two persons (*or* the small "platform" *may* be below the "col"); anyway the

[6] In early June, 1904, when I made the ascent with Josef Pollinger, there was apparently lashed round a great boss in this true right wall, some 30 ft. below the top and perhaps 40–50 ft. distant from the bed of the chimney, an enormous and ancient rope noose, from which 8–10 ft. of frayed end was swinging loose. On the descent of the Géant Glacier, we met M. Emile Fontaine and the Ravanels; they explained that this rope—enormous only in the extent of perpendicular terrain that it embraced—was a relic of attempts on the Requin before it was climbed; cf. *Mummery,* p. 169; *A.J.* **17**, 16. E. L. S.

traverse thence would land one into the chimney—" above the overhang " (Morse) or " some fifty feet up " (Wicks).'

' It is odd that so difficult a mountain should have been climbed by so many routes (see *Guide Vallot*)—and still odder that in the first four ascents the summit should have been approached by four different routes :—

1893 : Mummery's by S.W. and S.E. face to reach E.N.E. arête.

1896 : Wicks, Wilson, Simond—S.E. face to reach E.N.E. arête.

1898 : Fontaine's route up by " Colonnes " and down by his chimney (both facing S.E. and both new).

1899 : Joseph Gibson and Hans Almer's route *up* by ' Fontaine ' Chimney.

These notes were submitted to my old friend, Sir George Morse, President A.C., one of the great mountaineers of the period and a foremost member of what was in those days, pre-eminently, a great ' guideless ' party. I found that he possesses detailed accounts of his Alpine expeditions, and he is good enough to permit me to print the following extracts :

' Aug. 7, 1890 : Morse, Wicks and a porter, François Simond, age 22, going over the Col du Géant, had a shot at the Requin *en route*, got to foot of great chimney, subsequently named Fontaine Chimney, and found it plastered with ice, so returned to our route.

' Aug. 9, 1890 : Coming back from Courmayeur tried again. Both ascended the crack on the left, but could not do the traverse into the chimney.

' July 29, 1891 : Gibson,[7] Morse, Wicks and Wilson arrived at foot of chimney, and as snow began to fall had to return.

' Aug. 10, 1891 : Gibson,[7] Morse and Wicks, returning over Col du Géant, after a climb on the Grandes Jorasses, tried Requin again, and got no higher ; the weather being very cold was against us.

[7] J. H. Gibson, not to be confused with Joseph Gibson of the Cheminée Fontaine mentioned above.

'July 26, 1892 : Gibson,[8] Morse and Wicks tried two couloirs on the S.E. face, but made little height on either.

'July 27, 1892 : Same party tried again by the old route and found much snow on rocks and ice in the chimney, so returned.

'Aug. 6, 1892 : Same party tried again, but made no advance.

'July 26, 1893 : [9] Morse, Wicks and Wilson, coming from Col du Géant, ascended to foot of chimney, and I passed the small traverse for the *first* time into the chimney, and found it quite smooth with no handholds, so got no further.

'Aug. 6, 1893 : Morse, Wicks and Wilson tried S.E. face by 3 routes and found the rocks high up very slabby and difficult.

'July 10, 1898 : Morse, C. H. Pasteur and Alfred Simond tried Simond's route of July 1896 (see Wilson's account) and went up ridge to just below the "Hat," and could not get across from there, Simond saying the mountain must have changed.

'Aug. 16, 1906 : Ascended the Requin by ordinary route from foot of Fontaine Chimney with Ed. Payot and a young Ravanel, descending by the Fontaine Chimney. My notes say "went down the chimney using a 35 metre rope doubled, twice, found the climb very interesting, especially seeing all the big chimney, which we never could have got up."

'My *last* climb in the Alps was the Requin on August 7, 1923.

'P.S. I still *think* my traverse into the couloir was well above the overhanging step at the bottom, but I believe I was 20 ft. *at least* below the jammed stone. The whole chimney where I was, was quite smooth and no handhold appeared anywhere to help.

'The little traverse or ledge is very cramped and, if I re-

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[8] J. H. Gibson, not to be confused with Joseph Gibson of the Cheminée Fontaine mentioned above.

[9] Mummery's party made their ascent the day before.

member rightly only about 9 ins. wide and overhanging above, and you only get along on your knees and stomach and elbows, and it was all one could do not to fall off. From memory I should say it was 12 or 15 ft., and the man on the point at the top of the crack holding your rope was only a little above you, and couldn't have prevented a nasty fall. Whether this was Hans Almer's route I don't know; he *may* have traversed higher up. I know of no photograph showing the inside of the bottom of the chimney.'

Thus ends an interesting chapter.

An Extraordinary Escape.

By E. L. STRUTT.

THE scene is high up on the S.W. slopes of what is called (Piz) 'Grialetsch,' 2698 m., in the Fexthal. The date is December 29, 1926. The tale, describing a miraculous escape from death, is intended to point a moral. It should be read in conjunction with 'A.J.' **37,** 160–7. An absurdly garbled version has appeared in the 'cheap' Press. The writer apologizes for the constant use of the personal pronoun; under the circumstances this is inevitable.

Despite a high temperature (30° F.), signs of Foehn and a lowering sky, a party consisting of four persons—Miss Lindisfarne Hamilton, an English girl of nineteen; Mr. Patrick Hamilton, her younger brother; Mr. Christopher Hussey, a young Englishman, and myself—determined to start on an attempt to ascend the above summit. There was really nothing imprudent in this proceeding. The ascent does not present the slightest difficulty, and a quick return, should bad weather occur, could (or should) be easily accomplished. I had made the winter ascent on several previous occasions, and Miss Hamilton and her brother, both admirable walkers, had accompanied me. Hussey was an unknown quantity, but proved quite efficient. Miss Hamilton was provided with an ice-axe, Hamilton and Hussey had only ski-sticks, but all three were properly equipped in other respects. I was carrying all the *impedimenta* of the party, and decided at the last moment that a rope was not necessary and it was accordingly left behind.